

The Vision of Fred Barzyk: The WGBH New Television Workshop 1968 - 1978

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The Vision

There are at least two valid ways to encourage the creation of art. One, which might be called the D'Medici method, is to hand funding to specific artists for specific projects. Those artists, usually chosen through a rigorous selection process designed to weed out failure, create the work as specified, completing the commission. Artist and benefactor for the most part know what they are getting into and what the finished product will look like.

The other, rarely implemented, is to establish an environment of freedom and experimentation, provide the necessary tools, and invite creative people to come in and explore their artistic ideas with little constraint. With this method there is much failure. Artists may discover that the tools they are given and their ideas are not made for each other. Many promising projects are left incomplete. Such an environment may only arise out of an era of revolutionary ideas like the sixties, where this kind of unstructured play would seem important - an era which celebrated the journey more than the destination. But this was the method that guided the structure of the WGBH New Television Workshop, and because of the revolutionary medium that television represented to artists at that time, it was exactly the right approach.

New technologies are very seductive to a certain breed of artist. In any new merging of art and technology, whether it be the young Italian, Masaccio, in 1425 discovering space through one point perspective in painting or Nam June Paik trying to do with television everything that the engineers were working to avoid, the desire is to probe unexplored territory and to be the first to discover new techniques which will resonate within the human mind in a manner not felt before. Because the result is unknown, this type of artist tends to work best without constraints. Much of the experimentation comes from simply probing at technology to see what can go wrong and accepting the mistakes one likes best as process.

It was the vision of Fred Barzyk, his co-producer Olivia Tappan, and the New Television Workshop staff to establish an environment within the confines of the hitherto unapproachable broadcast television industry conducive to this kind of creativity. This was a most important step in the history of the young art form, to provide access to the video medium while letting the artists' own visions have free rein.

The Inception Of Video Art At WGBH

In 1958, when Fred Barzyk first came to WGBH there were 55 people on staff and the biggest show was the Boston Symphony. The local "live" character of Public Television encouraged experimentation. From 1964 to 1966, Barzyk produced Jazz Images, a music program which featured musicians who played to improvised switching by the production crew, including director, David Atwood.

During this time, Barzyk became influenced by the ideas of Marshall McLuhan and John Cage

and used them in a series called What's Happening, Mr. Silver. This was a weekly program hosted by Tufts professor David Silver. It culminated in one famous episode called Madness and Intuition. Barzyk recalled, "I used every film chain, every video tape machine, I had groups of thousands of slides being projected. I had a guy on a motorcycle circling two old people from a old people's home. I had two guys sleeping in bed. I had young artists from the western part of the state who were doing, at that time it was big in discos, [projecting mixed] ink and water. I gave Dave Atwood instructions that whenever anybody got bored they just yelled out and we would change to what ever else was there without any rhythm or reason, assuming that everything would make sense by the time it all came out. Twenty two minutes into the show I got up and left. As director I just walked out. One lady called up afterwards and said, 'Don't ever do that again, you've given me brain cancer.'"

With this kind of creative exploration about the structure of television already in place, WGBH was recognized from the outside as a place where artists would want to come and "play", as Barzyk has said.

The Workshop

The WGBH New Television Workshop began in 1967, although it was not formally named until 1974. It began with a single program called **The Medium Is The Medium**. New York gallery owner Howard Wise and the Ford Foundation approached Barzyk to direct a show on a revolutionary new art form called video art. Wise had seen an article in Newsweek about What's Happening, Mr. Silver. In 1969, **The Medium Is The Medium** aired nationally featuring six artists including a young Korean named Nam June Paik, who pioneered the idea of interactive television in his **Electronic Opera #1** by exhorting viewers to "close one eye" or "close one eye half way" and finally, "Turn off your television set".

"Nam June Paik showed up in [rubber] boots and with about twenty old TV sets." Barzyk remembers, "I asked him why he was wearing the boots and he said, 'Oh, I get electrocuted otherwise.' He asked if I could get a nude woman to dance over a picture of Richard Nixon. I went as far as I could on public television. I had a dancer who was willing to do it in pasties and a g-string. But that shook up the station too, because this was definitely not what they expected. However with the Ford Foundation supporting this show and getting national recognition they had to pay attention. Reluctantly, but they had to pay attention."

Paik introduced Barzyk to Howard Klein at the Rockefeller Foundation, who had seen the importance of this new medium some time before. Klein had already worked with a number of artists and institutions, like Paik and KQED in San Francisco, funding video experimentation. When he added WGBH and later WNET in New York to the process, he was able to design an entire program, the Rockefeller Artists-In-Television Project, to cover the various grants. Klein explained that he had "translated the needs of the artist to the institutional needs of the foundation." The program set up three Rockefeller funded video laboratories at these three Public Television stations. The Artists In Residence program at WGBH was an effort to see how artists would fit into the broadcast environment. The project soon evolved into an institution within the WGBH and became known as the New Television Workshop. Paik continued as a WGBH Artist In Residence. Barzyk recalls, "Nam June came into this place like a whirling

Korean dervish. He was brought in as a long term artist in residence. Nam June's vision was immense. His language was somewhat limited and his communication with engineers (and his ideas had a lot to do with engineering) were threatening to a lot of people. Nam June had an engineer friend in Tokyo, Mr. Abe, and he came to me with an idea that he would create a machine for himself which would be away from the requirements of the [WGBH] engineers. I remember he and I had lunch with Michael Rice [president of WGBH] and we laid out this huge piece of paper which tried to describe the synthesizer and what it was like and what it was going to do. I don't think Michael really understood, but he knew that Nam June would be gone for three months and we got the money needed to send him to Tokyo and to develop and devise this thing and bring Mr. Abe to help set it up here in the United States. I believe it was the first video synthesizer. It has now been sold to the Art Museum in Bremen [Germany]. The permanent installation of the world's first video synthesizer is now in Bremen."

The first use of the synthesizer was a four hour New Years Eve program, Video Commune - The Beatles: From Beginning To End, during which all the imagery was transformed during the live broadcast. Barzyk remembers, "After all this [synthesized video color signal] had been added in and manipulated by these guys, it blew the transmitter at WGBH. Needless to say, the engineers knew that Nam June was back." Later Ron Hays used the synthesizer to form the Music Image Workshop which among other projects created abstract video that was mixed in with broadcasts of the Boston Symphony.

Another early Artist In Residence was Stan Vanderbeek, a filmmaker who had already done important explorations using video and computer graphics in film. He was one of the better known media experimenters in art and technology. Barzyk remembers, "Stan was a wild man. In his films you always see this image where the top of his head creaks open and thousands of images fly in and fly out. Well, that really was Stan. I brought him in as an Artist In Residence and he produced a show, Violence Sonata, that really had the station reeling. It went to the edge because one of the major scenes in it had this white guy and a black woman in a bed together. At that time [1970], the Boston busing situation had [just begun.] The Globe wrote this thing about how could we? It was quite something, we survived it. You have to understand that [WGBH] was in constant state of shell-shock. They didn't know what we were going to do. They knew we were going to do something. They knew we weren't going to take them under but they were always greatly concerned about what we were doing."

As the Workshop expanded, Barzyk began to develop it along many lines. He explains, "We tried to do a whole range of things not limited to video artists. We tried to open up the concept for two reasons. One, was that this [was] a broadcast station, and to have a physical product show up on air every once in a while was a valid and important thing. [But] we protected the artists to do whatever they wanted to do, in whatever format they wanted to do it in. We also took a very aggressive attitude that there were people who were probably never going to think about using television. So we went to photographers, dancers, to a whole range. We went out and tried to be proselytizers and bring people in, so they could see if they wanted to do it or not. So there were two aspects of the workshop that were going on simultaneously: one, the open door policy for letting people explore and try what they wanted to do; the second level was that we attempted to encourage certain people to see whether they could work in [this medium.]"

The two channel dance video *City Motion Space Game* (1968) by Gus Solomons Jr. is an important example of this inclusive attitude at the Workshop. It was the first of many dance video projects that came out of the Workshop. Solomons, then a member of Merce Cunningham's Dance group, had graduated from M.I.T. in architecture. Barzyk remembers, "He knew the door was open here. *City Motion Space Game* was, in many ways, the most we ever did for a dance project." The Workshop went on to support and create many programs of literature, dance, performance and comedy over the years. Nancy Mason, wife of *City Motion Space Game* producer Rick Hauser, was head of the dance program at the Workshop throughout the early seventies until Susan Dowling took over.

Another important event at the workshop was *The Very First On-The-Air Half-Inch Video Festival Ever* in 1972. The Portapak, a half inch format videotape camera and deck manufactured by Sony, had been used for many years by artists and is credited with starting video art. For the festival, one studio and the WGBH parking lot was filled with artists and others all showing their low format video projects to the camera. This was the first exposure of many young New England and New York artists to WGBH, including a young Bill Viola.

One of the highlights of this era is Peter Campus' *Three Transitions*, a startling video exploration of the artist's own body. Campus had been suggested to Barzyk by Brian O'Doherty, who had gone from WGBH to the National Endowment for the Arts. Barzyk invited Campus, who came as an Artist-In-Residence in 1973. In *Three Transitions*, and the other videos that he created at the Workshop through 1976, he explored the parameters of the video space and video time in concise and precious little performances that contain a psychological shock even today. Barzyk says, "I still think that the opening sequence of *Three Transitions*, where he comes in, up slices himself open, crawls through himself to the other side and then closes himself up, is one of the most brilliant pieces of [video] work."

As part of their larger program, the Rockefeller Artists-In-Television Project had started another laboratory at WNET in Manhattan. WNET and WGBH worked closely together, sharing funding and production duties on a number of projects. New York artists like Paik started using both facilities and a project like *Tribute to John Cage* (1973) was created at both places.

The Studio

In 1974 the Workshop opened up a half-inch format television studio in a former movie theatre in Watertown, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, the Massachusetts Council for Arts and Humanities and the N.E.A. The studio was run by Dorothy Cheisa and catered to the needs of hundreds of local and national artists in many disciplines. Barzyk explained that "Dorothy was the one who really spent hours working with individual artists, making sure that their needs were taken care of." Two other Workshop events that year were the start of a weekly program on WGBH, *Artists Showcase*, which ran until 1982 and the important production narrated by Brian O'Doherty, *Video: The New Wave*, the first national PBS broadcast of video art.

The Watertown studio allowed local emerging artists access to television equipment in a new way. Artists like Fred Simon, Donald Burgy, Bob Lewis, Jane Hudson and Ros and Harris Barron were among the many who worked with Dorothy Cheisa and Ron Hays.

The Harrises were early Artists In Residence, (still today, they refer to themselves as Rockefeller Artists In Television or R.A.T.s.) Their experimental theater group called Zone had traveled around New England and New York State to critical acclaim. Ros Barron then made focused on a experimental videos including Head Game as well as a series of Magritte videos. Magritte Sur La Plage made in 1976 was inspired by the Magrittes painting, Les Amours.

Another artist who created some of his early important work at Workshop's studio was William Wegman. In the early seventies, "all of a sudden for the first time," Barzyk explains, the National Endowment for the Arts, "started receiving video tapes. No one knew what to do with these things, so I was asked to come in and sit in on a panel to take a look at the tapes that were coming in. And lo and behold, there was this tape by this guy called Bill Wegman out in California. I didn't know he was from Massachusetts at all. I fell in love with his stuff. I just really responded well to him. Made the invitation as soon as we had set up the residency for Bill to join. Then I found out [Wegman had gone to] Mass College of Art, he came from the western part [of the state]. By that time, he and his relationship with his dog had been well formed. Bill was here for probably, it might have been as much as six months, three months." The videos of Wegman's dog Man Ray created in the Workshop went on to be enjoyed on Saturday Night Live as well as contemporary art museums throughout the world.

The Next Decade

Barzyk continued as director of the Workshop until 1979 when Susan Dowling took over. As funding became scarce the Workshop redefined its mission. The studio closed and much of its equipment was donated to start the Boston Film / Video Foundation, Boston's oldest independent media art center. Under Dowling, the Workshop entered into a famous collaboration with the Institute of Contemporary Art called The Contemporary Art Television (CAT) Fund, which commissioned much well known video art in the eighties. The Workshop officially ended in Fall of 1993, making it the longest lived of the public television laboratories in video art.

VideoSpace at DeCordova is a continuing media arts collaboration between the DeCordova Museum and the Space, a nonprofit alternative arts organization. The DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park is funded in part by the Institute of Museum Services, a federal agency and the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency which also receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts. Audio and visual equipment provided in part by Cambridge Soundworks, Inc.